Transcript of Michelle Obama's commencement address

Michelle Obama returns to her South Side home to deliver the commencement speech for Martin Luther King Jr. College Prep graduates. (WGN TV)

MRS. OBAMA:  Wow!  (Applause.)  Yes!

STUDENT:  We love you so much, Michelle!

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MRS. OBAMA:  Oh, I love you guys!  (Applause.)  Look, I am beyond excited to be here with the winners of our first-ever FAFSA Video Challenge, the King College Prep Class of 2015!  (Applause.)

So let me just explain, because you all know some of the best schools in the country submitted videos for this challenge.  But when I saw your Scandal video, let me tell you, I was blown away.  I was just blown away with -- amazing.  I was blown away by your creativity, but I was even more blown away by how hard you all worked to achieve your outstanding FAFSA completion rate here at KCP.  In fact, as you saw, I was so impressed that I decided to send your video to the cast of the real Scandal.  And they were so impressed that Shonda Rhimes and Kerry Washington and the whole staff, they wanted to be a part of this graduation.  And I want to thank Libby, because she was the only one who knew.  She kept the secret.  So let’s give the cast of Scandal another round of applause.  Wasn’t that wonderful?  (Applause.)  That’s how special you all are.  That is just how special you all are.

And I want to thank Libby for that wonderful introduction.  I want to thank Jostens for their generosity.  And, of course, I want to honor the Pendleton family for their courage and their grace and their love.  I love these folks.  (Applause.)  Hadiya’s memory is truly a blessing and an inspiration to me and to my husband and to people across this country and around the world.  And we are so grateful for her family’s presence here tonight.  Love you all.  Love you so much.  (Applause.)

[](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-michelle-obama-king-college-prep-graduation-20150609-story.html)

[Michelle Obama honors Chicago grads, slain classmate Hadiya Pendleton](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/ct-michelle-obama-king-college-prep-graduation-20150609-story.html)

I also want to acknowledge President Watson, Provost Henderson, Jesse Ruiz, as well as the fabulous singers -- way to go, guys!  (Applause.)  And our musicians, the best band in the land.  (Applause.)  And all of the amazing student speakers -- you guys did such a phenomenal job.  You’re amazing.  (Applause.)

And of course, I want to give a big shoutout to Principal Narain for his outstanding leadership.  Yes.  (Applause.)  He made sure my speech was up here, so I thank him for that.  (Laughter.)  But also, to the phenomenal teachers, the administrators, the school counselors, the staff who pushed you, who inspired you, who hunted you down in the hallway to fill out your FAFSA forms -- well done.  (Laughter and applause.)

And, graduates, I think we’ve got to give another show of love to the parents, the guardians, the grandparents, the aunts, the uncles, the siblings -- (applause) -- everyone else who has been there for you throughout your lives -- the folks who shook you out of bed in the morning, and didn’t let you go to sleep until your homework was done; the folks who believed in you; the folks who sacrificed for you and loved you even when you drove them crazy.  Today is their day too.  Let’s give them a round of applause.  (Applause.)  Yes!  That’s it, blow kisses.  That’s right, mom.  Take your bow.



The graduation exercises for Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/arts-culture/culture/martin-luther-king-jr.-PEHST001228-topic.html) College Preparatory High School, where Hadiya Pendleton would have been a senior this year, were held at [Chicago State University](http://www.chicagotribune.com/topic/education/colleges-universities/chicago-state-university-OREDU000801-topic.html). First lady Michelle Obama delivered the commencement address to classmates of the slain 15-year-old.

 (Nancy Stone, Chicago Tribune)

And of course, most of all, to the class of 2015 –- you all, congratulations.  You did it!  You did it!  You are here!  You are here!   (Applause.)  And you all look so good, so glamorous, so handsome.  But just think about how hard you worked to make it to this day -- stayed up late studying, working on those college essays, preparing for those ACTs.  I understand that you threw yourselves into your activities as well –- the Jaguars won the Division 3A basketball regional championship.  (Applause.)  Pretty nice.  The best band in the land performed with Jennifer Hudson -- really?  Jennifer Hudson?  J-Hud?  -- and at the NFL Draft.  (Applause.)  I hear you all lit up the stage with Shrek the Musical -- (applause) -- Spring Concert I heard was pretty nice.  But you all truly honored Dr. King’s legacy with your commitment to service-learning.

So, graduates, tonight, I am feeling so proud of you.  I am feeling so excited for you.  I am feeling so inspired by you.  But there is one thing that I’m not feeling right now, and that is surprised.  I am not at all surprised by how accomplished you all are.  (Applause.)  I’m not at all surprised by the dedication your teachers have shown, or by the sacrifices your families have made to carry you to this day.  I’m not surprised because I know this community.

I was born and raised here on the South Side, in South Shore, and I am who I am today because of this community.  (Applause.)  I know the struggles many of you face -- how you walk the long way home to avoid the gangs.  How you fight to concentrate on your homework when there’s too much noise at home.  How you keep it together when your families are having hard times making ends meet.

But more importantly, I also know the strengths of this community.  I know the families on the South Side.  And while they may come in all different shapes and sizes, most families here are tight, bound together by the kind of love that gets stronger when it’s tested.

I know that folks on the South Side work hard -- the kind of hard where you forget about yourself and you just worry about your kids, doing everything it takes -- juggling two and three jobs, taking long bus rides to the night shift, scraping pennies together to sign those kids up for every activity you can afford –- Park District program, the Praise Dance Ministries -- whatever it takes to keep them safe and on the right track.  And I know that in this community, folks have a deep faith, a powerful faith, and folks are there for each other when times get hard, because we understand that “there but for the grace of God go I.”  (Applause.)

And over the past six years as First Lady, I’ve visited communities just like this one all across this country -- communities that face plenty of challenges and crises, but where folks have that same strong work ethic, those same good values, those same big dreams for their kids.

But unfortunately, all those positive things hardly ever make the evening news.  Instead, the places where we’ve grown up only make headlines when something tragic happens -– when someone gets shot, when the dropout rate climbs, when some new drug is ruining people’s lives.

So too often, we hear a skewed story about our communities –- a narrative that says that a stable, hardworking family in a neighborhood like Woodlawn or Chatham or Bronzeville is somehow remarkable; that a young person who graduates from high school and goes to college is a beat-the-odds kind of hero.

Look, I can’t tell you how many times people have met my mother and asked her, “Well, how on Earth did you ever raise kids like Michelle and Craig in a place like South Shore?”  And my mom looks at these folks like they’re crazy, and she says, “Michelle and Craig are nothing special.  There are millions of Craigs and Michelles out there.  And I did the same thing that all those other parents did.”  She says, “I loved them.  I believed in them.  And I didn’t take any nonsense from them.”  (Applause.)

And I’m here tonight because I want people across this country to know that story –- the real story of the South Side.  The story of that quiet majority of good folks -- families like mine and young people like all of you who face real challenges but make good choices every single day.  (Applause.)  I’m here tonight because I want you all to know, graduates, that with your roots in this community and your education from this school, you have everything –- you hear me, everything –- you need to succeed.  (Applause.)

And I’m here tonight because I want to share with you just two fundamental lessons that I’ve learned in my own life, lessons grounded in the courage, love and faith that define this community and that I continue to live by to this day.

Now, the first lesson is very simple, and that is, don’t ever be afraid to ask for help.  And I cannot stress that enough.  During your four years here at King College Prep, you all were surrounded by folks who were determined to help you, as Jade said -– teachers who stayed after class to explain an assignment, counselors who pushed you to apply to college, coaches who saw something special in you that no one had seen before.

And as you head to college or the military, or whatever else comes next, you will face plenty of obstacles.  There will be times when you find yourself struggling.  And at first, you might not know where to turn to for help.  Or maybe you might be too embarrassed to ask.  And trust me, I know how that feels.

See, when I started my freshman year at Princeton, I felt totally overwhelmed and out of place.  I had never spent any meaningful time on a college campus.  I had never been away from home for an extended period of time.  I had no idea how to choose my classes, to -- how to take notes in a large lecture.  And then I looked around at my classmates, and they all seemed so happy and comfortable and confident.  They never seemed to question whether they belonged at a school like Princeton.

So at first, I didn’t tell a soul how anxious and lonely and insecure I was feeling.  But as I got to know my classmates, I realized something important.  I realized that they were all struggling with something, but instead of hiding their struggles and trying to deal with them all alone, they reached out.  They asked for help.  If they didn’t understand something in class, they would raise their hand and ask a question, then they’d go to professor’s office hours and ask even more questions.  And they were never embarrassed about it, not one bit.  Because they knew that that’s how you succeed in life.

See, growing up, they had the expectation that they would succeed, and that they would have the resources they needed to achieve their goals.  So whether it was taking an SAT-prep class, getting a math tutor, seeking advice from a teacher or counselor -- they took advantage of every opportunity they had.

So I decided to follow their lead.  I found an advisor who helped me choose my classes.  I went to the multicultural student center and met older students who became my mentor.  And soon enough, I felt like I had this college thing all figured out.  And, graduates, wherever you are headed, I guarantee you that there will be all kinds of folks who are eager to help you, but they are not going to come knocking on your door to find you.  You have to take responsibility to find them.  (Applause.)

So if you are struggling with an assignment, go to a tutoring session.  If you’re having trouble with a paper, get yourself to the writing center.  And if someone isn’t helpful, if they are impatient or unfriendly, then just find somebody else.  You may have to go to a second, or third, or a fourth person but if you keep asking.  (Applause.)  And if you understand that getting help isn’t a sign of weakness but a sign of strength, then I guarantee you that you will get what you need to succeed.

And that brings me to the other big lesson that I want to share with you today.  It’s a lesson about how to get through those struggles, and that is, instead of letting your hardships and failures discourage or exhaust you, let them inspire you.  Let them make you even hungrier to succeed.

Now, I know that many of you have already dealt with some serious losses in your lives.  Maybe someone in your family lost a job or struggled with drugs or alcohol or an illness.  Maybe you’ve lost someone you love, someone you desperately wish could be here with you tonight.  And I know that many of you are thinking about Hadiya right now and feeling the hole that she’s left in your hearts.

So, yes, maybe you’ve been tested a lot more and a lot earlier in life than many other young people.  Maybe you have more scars than they do.  Maybe you have days when you feel more tired than someone your age should ever really feel.  But, graduates, tonight, I want you to understand that every scar that you have is a reminder not just that you got hurt, but that you survived.  (Applause.)  And as painful as they are, those holes we all have in our hearts are what truly connect us to each other.  They are the spaces we can make for other people’s sorrow and pain, as well as their joy and their love so that eventually, instead of feeling empty, our hearts feel even bigger and fuller.

So it’s okay to feel the sadness and the grief that comes with those losses.  But instead of letting those feelings defeat you, let them motivate you.  Let them serve as fuel for your journey.  See, that’s what folks in this community have always done.  Just look at our history.

Take the story of Lorraine Hansberry, who grew up right here on the South Side.  Lorraine was determined to be a playwright, but she struggled to raise the money to produce her first play.  But Lorraine stayed hungry.  And eventually, that play -– “A Raisin in the Sun” –- became the first play by an African American woman to make it to Broadway.  (Applause.)

And how about Richard Wright, who spent his young adult years on the South Side.  Richard’s father was a sharecropper who abandoned his family.  And while Richard loved to read, the local library wouldn’t let him check out books because he was black.  So Richard went ahead and wrote books of his own –- books like “Native Son,” and “Black Boy,” that made him one of the greatest writers in American history.  (Applause.)

And finally, tonight, I’m thinking about my own parents -- yes, Marian and Frazier Robinson.  See, neither of them went to college.  They never had much money.  But they were determined to see me and my brother get the best education possible.  So my mom served on the PTA, and she volunteered at school so she could keep an eye on us.

As for my Dad, he worked as a pump operator at the city water plant.  And even after he was diagnosed with MS in his thirties, and it became harder for him to walk and get dressed, he still managed to pull himself out of bed every morning, no matter how sick he felt.  Every day, without fail, I watched my father struggle on crutches to slowly make his way across our apartment, out the door to work, without complaint or self-pity or regret.  (Applause.)

Now, my Dad didn’t live to see me in the White House.  He passed away from complications from his illness when I was in my twenties.  And, graduates, let me tell you, he is the hole in my heart.  His loss is my scar.  But let me tell you something, his memory drives me forward every single day of my life.  (Applause.)  Every day, I work to make him proud.  Every day, I stay hungry, not just for myself, but for him and for my mom and for all the kids I grew up with who never had the opportunities that my family provided for me.

And, graduates, today, I want to urge you all to do the same thing.  There are so many folks in your school and in your families who believe in you, who have sacrificed for you, who have poured all of their love and hope and ambition into you.  And you need to stay hungry for them.  (Applause.)

There are so many young people who can only dream of the opportunities you’ve had at King College Prep –- young people in troubled parts of the world who never set foot in a classroom.  Young people in this community who don’t have anyone to support them.  Young people like Hadiya, who were taken from us too soon and can never become who they were meant to be.  You need to stay hungry for them.

And, graduates, look, I know you can do this.  See, because if Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright could stay hungry through their hardships and humiliations; if Dr. Martin Luther King, the namesake of your school, could sacrifice his life for our country, then I know you can show up for a tutoring session.  I know you can go to some office hours.  (Applause.)

If Hadiya’s friends and family could survive the heartbreak and pain; if they could found organizations to honor her unfulfilled dreams; if they could inspire folks across this country to wear orange in to protest gun violence -- then I know you all can live your life with the same determination and joy that Hadiya lived her life.  I know you all can dig deep and keep on fighting to fulfill your own dreams.

Because, graduates, in the end, you all are the ones responsible for changing the narrative about our communities.  (Applause.)  Wherever you go next, wherever you go, you all encounter people who doubt your very existence -- folks who believe that hardworking families with strong values don’t exist on the South Side of Chicago, or in Detroit, or in El Paso, or in Indian Country, or in Appalachia.  They don’t believe you are real.

And with every word you speak, with every choice you make, with the way you carry yourself each day, you are rewriting the story of our communities.  And that’s a burden that President Obama and I proudly carry every single day in the White House.  (Applause.)  Because we know that everything we do and say can either confirm the myths about folks like us, or it can change those myths.  (Applause.)

So, graduates, today, I want you all to join our team as we fight to get out the truth about our communities -- about our inner cities and our farm towns, our barrios, our reservations.  You need to help us tell our story –- the story of Lorraine Hansberry and Richard Wright, the story of my family and your families, the story of our sacrifice, our hunger, our hard work.

Graduates, starting today, it is your job to make sure that no one ever again is surprised by who we are and where we come from.  (Applause.)  And you know how I know you can do this?  Because you all -- graduates of the King College Prep High School.  You all are from so many proud communities –- North Kenwood, Chatham, South Shore, Woodlawn, Hyde Park -– I could go on and on.  You embody all of the courage and love, all of the hunger and hope that have always defined these communities –- our communities.

And I am so proud of you all.  And I stay inspired because of you.  And I cannot wait to see everything you all continue achieve in the years ahead.

So thank you.  God bless you.  I love you all.  Congratulations.  (Applause.)

*Transcript provided by the Office of the First Lady*